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Outdated assumptions about maternal grandmothers? gender and lineage in grandparent–grandchild relationships

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ABSTRACT

The impact of lineage and gender on the quality of grandparent–grandchild relationships has become more complicated in recent decades. In countries with high rates of couple dissolution and re-partnering, the number of a child's potential grandparents increases as the parents of parents' new partners or the new partners of grandparents become part of the family. The broadening of 'family' potentially puts new types of grandparents on an equal footing with biological grandparents. Loosening conventions around gender and more 'maternal fathers' may lead to 'new grandfathers' who are as hands-on as grandmothers. This paper re-examines the issues with quantitative and qualitative UK data. The evidence shows the persistence of a hierarchy of involvement, with maternal grandmothers at the top and paternal grandfathers the bottom but also counter-examples pointing to the possibilities of and limits on wider social change, as three generations negotiate relationships in the shifting socio-economic conditions of their national and local context.

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Family; grandmother; grandfather; gender; grandchild; lineage

Introduction

In the context of Northern European and North American cultures, the role of grandparent has been described as lacking a definite script (Kivett, 1991) beyond a normative injunction to avoid interference in parenting (Cherlin and Fustenberg, 1992) and, perhaps, to make themselves available, at least some of the time (May, Mason, & Clarke, 2012). This lack of script has in turn been used as an explanation for considerable variation in how grandparents are involved with their grandchildren, with variations across families, between grandparents, even within a single family and over a child's life. However, cultural and structural framing is indicated by persistent differences reported in the research literature in the quality and intensity of relationships between grandparents and grandchildren by lineage and gender, as well as by dimensions of inequalities such as social class (Bradshaw, Jamieson & Wasoff 2008; Dench & Ogg, 2002; Glaser et al., 2010; Hank & Buber, 2009; Jamieson, Warner, & Bradshaw, 2012; Koslowski, 2009). Across many countries, the span of healthier lives has increased for both men and women while families have become

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smaller, making active grandparenting and intense grandparent–grandchild relationships more feasible (Arber & Timonen, 2012). To understand grandparenthood, it is necessary to look at the interaction of the whole-family configuration with interlocked economic, demographic and cultural change since the 1950s.

Maternal grandmothers occupy a particular position of prominence across the relatively affluent Euro-American nations sharing the package of demographic change that combines low fertility, relatively high rates of couple dissolution and increasing longevity, with women continuing to outlive men, many of whom spend part of older age living alone. Low fertility not only means smaller families, but fewer sets of biologically related grandchildren, with grandparents potentially competing for their time (Hagestad, 2006; Uhlenberg, 2005). However, re-partnering can further complicate this pattern by adding sets of ‘step-grandchildren’, the children of new partners of children or the grandchildren of new partners of grandparents.

By the late twentieth century, the child-rearing phase of family life is commonly short, emotionally intense and pressed for time. The typical pattern is dual-earning couples whose combination of caring and providing enables both a higher standard of living than a sole-income household and avoids the pervasiveness of women’s economic dependence sustained by the male-breadwinner model. However, the extensive literature on domestic divisions of labour of parenting heterosexual couples indicates that women typically continue to do more of the caring work than men. Once grown up, children and parents typically retain a lifelong sense of linked lives, now sometimes further intensified by the constant connectedness of internet technologies. Grandparents are often part of the support system of parents, just as their own adult children are often part of their support system in older old age. There are circumstances where economic structures and cultural scripts place particular significance on paternal grandparents. For example, in Irish rural farm-family communities where land was (and sometimes still is) passed down the paternal line. Vestiges remain here of a tradition of a son and his wife living with his parents after marriage (Gray, Geraghty, & Ralph, 2013). However, the idea of ‘matrilineal advantage’ (Chan & Elder, 2000), a mother’s parents having a relationship with grandchildren that is privileged over father’s parents, would also be no surprise in contemporary Ireland, just as in much of Europe, North American, Australia and New Zealand.

Since the 1950s, social researchers of family life in much of Europe, North American, Australia and New Zealand have talked about maternal grandparents, and particularly grandmothers, having closer relationships with their daughters’ children than the paternal grandparents. A range of theoretical resources has been drawn on by way of explanation but not evolutionary and rational choice theories, which start from very different premises from the relational view of family configurations contextualised in relatively recent structural and cultural change adopted here (see Coall, Hilbrand, Sear, & Hertwig, 2016, and Knudsen, 2016, for reviews). Writing in the context of the USA, Chan and Elder (2000) suggested that high levels of couple dissolution and re-partnering jumble the certainties of patrilineal inheritance and undermine the possibility of ‘patrilineal advantage’. Despite very significant social change in gender equality since the 1950s, as already noted, there is also significant continuity in gendered divisions of labour and normative scripts about who should care for children. The maternal grandmother’s advantage may depend on continued unequal burdens of responsibility within parenting couples as well as the legacy of unequal divisions of caring work in the now-grandparenting couples, even if

gendered divisions of labour tend to blur in older age (Arber, Davidson, & Ginn, 2003). Shifts in attitudes to children, more child-centred families and more intensive mothering are the aspects of post-war affluence and a greater cultural emphasis on the quality of personal relationships (Jamieson, 1998). Women's greater hands-on experience of nurturing young children, more time spent with children, strategizing and organising to prioritise children's interests, underpin women's closer relationships across generations. If parenting mothers and fathers are most likely to turn to their own mother for support with their own parenting, the 'matrilineal advantage' is underpinned by the continued primacy of mothers as children's primary carers. This means that support will more often be sought from mothers' mothers, giving them more opportunities for a special relationship with their grandchildren. A sense of the joy of relationships with children is both backdrop to the advantages of the maternal grandmother and the potential of her losing ground to the 'competition' from other grandparents.

There has been renewed interest in 'matrilineal advantage' and gender dynamics that place the maternal grandmother at the top of the hierarchy in terms of quality of relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. Current explanations continue to focus on the gendered interconnections across three generations and the pivotal position typically occupied by the mother in the middle (Arber & Timonen, 2012; Hagestad, 2006) – a position sometimes and perhaps increasingly to be taken up by stay-at-home fathers. The mother in the middle, as the main primary carer of the child, typically orchestrates the wider network of care and kin-keeping supporting the child and their own parenting (Hansen, 2005; Miller, 2005), particularly when children are young. This includes acting as a bridge and gatekeeper for grandparents' access to grandchildren outside of times of need, as well as mobilising grandparents as a reserve army of assistance. In the literature on grandparents' contributions to parenting families, maternal grandmothers are often identified as the front line of a reserve army of childcarers providing flexible care for working mothers (Glaser et al., 2010). Since the 1950s, a class-specific ideal of intensive mothering has added to the set of activities mothers must maintain to be 'good mothers', accompanied by a sense of responsibility for a child's wellbeing that endures across a lifetime (Fox, 2006; Hays, 1996; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). The Norwegian scholar Hagestad (2006) has argued that, as parent-child relationships have become more intense, much of grandparenting can be seen as a form of continued parenting as grandparents sustain support to their adult children. Grandparenting is also sometimes called a 'second chance' at parenting, another opportunity to enjoy developing a loving, emotionally intense relationship with children (Rotkirch & Buchanan, 2016).

Researchers have paid particular attention to grandparent-grandchild relationships following the dissolution of the couple relationship of the middle generation (Bridges, Roe, Dunn, & O'Connor, 2007; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1992; Dench & Ogg, 2002; Doyle, O'Dwyer, & Timonen, 2010; Ferguson, Douglas, Lowe, Murch, & Robertson, 2004; Lussier et al., 2002; Timonen & Doyle, 2012). The subsequent pattern of interaction between grandparents and grandchildren found in this body of research seems to confirm the dominance of matrilineal kin and the particular significance of maternal grandmothers. While grandparents on both sides of families often step up their help to assist their children following the dissolution of a parenting couple, the effect is much stronger among maternal grandparents and there is also clear evidence that some paternal grandparents struggle to remain in contact. The asymmetry has been taken as confirming matrilineal advantage and the

pivotal role of the mother in the middle. At the same time, there are also counter narratives in this literature, for example, the studies of Martha Doyle and her colleagues show paternal grandparents working hard and developing strategies to sustain their relationships (Doyle et al., 2010; Timonen & Doyle, 2012).

Recent research literature offers further evidence which weighs against the idea of grandmother's advantage and suggests the rise of the emotionally involved grandfather. The scene for the latter is set by research on fathers which documents intimate relationships with their children that are one-to-one, rather than mediated through mothers (Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2017; Miller, 2011). However, the research also identifies a frequent gap between desire for quality time and time actually spent with children. Hence when grandfatherhood occurs beyond retirement age, a 'second chance' opportunity presents itself. Grandfathers expressing gratitude for their grandfatherhood speak out from the growing research literature (see Buchanan & Rotkirch, 2016). Some recent work also suggests that the dominance of the maternal grandmother may be overstated by too narrow a focus on grandparent–grandchild relationships in the early years. Older children's connections to grandfathers and grandmothers show that young men in particular sometimes feel a special connection to maternal grandfathers (Mann, Khan, & Leeson, 2013). However, this body of work also suggests ways in which relationships between children and grandmothers and grandfathers remain relationships that are 'doing gender' by reinforcing notions of male and female activities (Mann, Tarrant, & Leeson, 2016). The literature also suggests that a grandfather needs a grandmother at his side to be an emotionally engaged 'good grandfather' (Knudsen, 2016).

GUS data

The findings reported here are from an analysis of data from The Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) and interviews with a small sample of the grandparents of GUS study children. GUS tracked the lives of a representative sample of Scottish children across the early years of childhood through annual sweeps of questions to the child's main carer, a mother in about 97% of cases. The first sweep of field work with a cohort of 5217 children approximately 1 year old began in April 2005. Fairly detailed questions about grandparents were asked then and again when children were 3 and 6 years old, by which time the sample size had reduced by attrition to 3657. Much of the subsequent analysis draws on this latter sweep of data. At age 6, the majority of children have one sibling and only 20% of GUS study children were the *only* child in their home. 7% of homes included three or more children. At this age, 76% lived with their natural mother and father, 19% in lone mother households, 4% with their mother and her new partner, 1% with their father but not mother, or another carer.

At the time of interviewing grandparents, the children participating in GUS were 11 years old. Recruitment of grandparents required double permission from the child's mother (or main carer): first, to authorise research beyond the GUS survey, and second, to facilitate contact with a grandparent. The goal was to recruit a diverse sample of grandparents, including those judged by the mother as emotionally distant from the study child. However, the mother was much more likely to facilitate researcher contact with persons she considered to be 'close' grandparents. None of the grandparents recruited saw themselves as anything other than 'close'. Of the 24 sets of grandparents recruited, 12

interviews were with one or both members of grandparenting couples, 9 were with grandmothers living alone, and 3 with grandfathers living alone. For some interviewees, the grandchild participating in GUS (and his or her siblings) was their only set of grandchildren but, more commonly, they had at least one other set of grandchildren. The interviewees were fairly equally distributed between grandparents who were solely maternal (only through daughters), solely paternal (only through sons) and both maternal and paternal. They ranged in age from 43 to 89 years and, in the number of grandchildren, from 1 to 9. They included eight sets of grandparents of children who had experienced parental divorce or separation, and four grandparents who had themselves divorced.

Circumstances favouring maternal grandmothers: longevity, proximity, capacity

GUS data illustrate the growing abundance and complexity of grandparent 'lineage', but that children are more likely to have a maternal grandmother than any other living grandparent. The data suggest the importance of some basic factors in favour of maternal grandmothers that should not be taken for granted or treated as immutable – being alive, being nearby, and having time and energy.

'Who counts as a grandparent?' in the Growing Up in Scotland study is the same as it is in most families: anyone who is called a grandparent. The child's mother, or main carer, does the naming and categorising of grandparents through their relationship to herself and her child. In addition to a maternal grandmother, mothers distinguished 11 other sorts of grandparents across potential 6 sets. A child with a non-resident father and a re-partnered mother could have six grandparents in three sets, with the parents of their non-resident father, of their mother, and of their mother's partner, each forming a set of grandparents acting as a couple. Divorce, separation and re-partnering in this grandparent generation could then turn these three sets into six sets and the six types of grandparents could become 12. However, in the GUS no child had more than 10 grandparents and some types were rarities. The range was from none (1%) to 10, with a median of 4 (44%), and over half of children having 4 or more grandparents (4% have 5 and 4% have 6 or more). The likelihood of a child having four living grandparents is complicated by inequalities in longevity by social class and an association between early motherhood and social disadvantage. The older a mother is at her child's birth, the less likely her child is to have four or more living grandparents at age 6. However, not all children born to mothers under 30 have an equal chance of four grandparents at age 6; children living in more deprived circumstances have a much higher chance of losing one or more grandparents than peers from more privileged backgrounds (Jamieson et al., 2012) and the demographic trend is for grandfathers to die first.

A child's chances of having a living maternal grandmother are higher than they are of other grandparents because of the higher proportion of children with a known mother than father, the near-global continued greater longevity of women compared to men, alongside the persistence of the tradition of women being younger than their male partners. In combination, these trends support maternal grandmothers having more opportunity to be grandparents than grandfathers or paternal grandmothers. Table 1 shows that at age 3 and age 6, the proportion of children with maternal grandmothers is more than 12 percentage points higher than for any other grandparent.

Table 1. Grandparents by relationship to child's main carer.

Relationship of grandparent to child's main carer ^a	Age 3%	Age 6%
Mother	91	88
Father	78	74
Partner's mother	75	66
Partner's father	64	55
Child's non-resident father's mother	10	17
Child's non-resident father's father	8	14
Mother's partner	9	8
Father's partner	5	5
Partner's mother's partner	5	4
Partner's father's partner	4	3
Child's non-resident father's mother's partner	1	1
Child's non-resident father's father's partner	1	1
<i>Bases (all children with grandparents)</i>		
<i>Weighted</i>	4158	3597
<i>Unweighted</i>	N 4158	3600

^aChild's Main Carer = mother in 97% of cases.

At age 3, 58% of GUS survey children had an emotionally close relationship with a maternal grandmother who lived at a proximity defined as within 30 minutes drive (91% had a living maternal grandmother, 68% of whom live locally and 94% of maternal grandmothers living locally were emotionally close). As Table 2 shows, maternal grandmothers are the grandparent most likely to live nearby. Living nearby is likely to make frequent contact easier and is associated with the grandparent being seen as emotionally 'close' to the grandchild. The reasons for proximity are not explored in GUS but are likely to be varied, sometimes reflecting limited opportunities for mobility and sometimes chosen to express a sense of linked lives. Having a maternal grandmother who lives nearby is more common among children from less advantaged circumstances. The proportion of children with no local grandparents is greatest in high income households, reflecting higher mobility. The range with no local grandparents is from 8% among children in the bottom quintile of household income to 22% in children in the top quintile. The analysis of grandparents' contributions to the childcare of school-attending 6-year olds shows that the more privileged households more frequently mobilise grandparents living more

Table 2. Percentage of children with living grandparents described as geographically local and emotionally 'close' at age 3, growing up in Scotland.

Relationship of grandparent to main carer ^a	% who live locally	% of local grandparents who are 'close' to child	<i>Bases</i> <i>(Grandparents who live locally)</i>	
			<i>Weighted</i>	<i>Unweighted</i>
Mother	68	94	2845	2768
Father	53	85	2228	2186
Partner's mother	49	81	2071	2119
Partner's father	40	73	1675	1721
Child's non-resident father's mother	8	52	316	253
Child's non-resident father's father	6	46	255	206
Mother's partner	7	82	275	251
Father's partner	3	61	114	112
Partner's mother's partner	3	68	143	143
Partner's father's partner	2	62	69	73
<i>Bases (All children with grandparents)</i>		–	–	–
<i>Weighted</i>	4158	–	–	–
<i>Unweighted</i>	4158	–	–	–

^aChild's Main Carer = mother in 97% of cases.

than 30 minutes drive away to provide care during the school holidays (Jamieson et al., 2012). Among those grandparents who live more than 30-minute-drive away, maternal grandmothers remain more likely to be described as close than any other grandparent in these circumstances.

As well as higher probabilities of geographical proximity, GUS data suggest that maternal grandmothers also have higher probabilities of being fit because they are younger and more able to be flexible about how they spend their time because of their employment circumstances. The data do not tell us about the cause of their lower rates of employment, but when their grandchildren were aged 6, 44% of maternal grandmothers were below the age of 60, 59% of these being employed. 31% of maternal grandmothers were aged 60–69 and of these 23% were employed. The equivalent figures for maternal grandfathers were 37% under the age of 60, 70% of whom were employed and 43% age 60–69, 38% of whom were employed.

The data reported above emphasise the importance of not underestimating the demographic and societal trends that favour the maternal grandmother – being alive, living nearby and being able to give time and energy to her grandchild. However, the ‘closeness’ of geographically distant maternal grandmothers also supports looking beyond these factors.

Grandparent–grandchild interaction: gendered and gender neutral

Some children participating in GUS had no contact with some of their living grandparents. Only 4% had no contact with a living maternal grandmother, compared to 12% for maternal grandfathers and paternal grandmothers, 17% for paternal grandfathers, 55% for mothers of non-resident fathers and 58% for fathers of non-resident fathers. The GUS survey collects information about the nature of interaction between grandchildren and their grandparents for those who are in touch.

Table 3 illustrates the pattern of the combined effect of lineage and gender; more maternal grandparents interact frequently with their grandchild than paternal grandparents and more grandmothers than grandfathers. The grandparenting set with the highest levels of interaction are maternal grandparent couples who have neither divorced nor re-partnered. Questions were not asked individually of coupled grandmothers and grandfathers, so we cannot tell whether they are equally involved with their grandchildren. They might be acting as a unit or they might have divisions of labour that pursue more gendered activities with grandchildren. Interviews confirm that both models operate and that grandparents do often pursue activities that are gendered.

My husband just needs to mention the word golf and they'll be away for hours. I just switch off at that time because, you know, but he spends a lot of time with the boys. He takes them to golf. He's taken them out because he's a golfer. So he always takes them golfing. And they always ask – what are you gonna take us again? – you know, so that's lovely, he enjoys that. 'Cause he used to go golfing with his dad when he was young. So, that's nice for him. And I always go with Lisa (daughter) to highland dancing. When there are competitions I always go with Lisa just to help her and be there for the girls, you know. You'll be there to tell them they're doing well. (Sophia, and husband Ross are maternal grandparents, 2 sets and 7 grandchildren)

Interviewee grandfathers as well as grandmothers expressed a strong interest in close relationships with grandchildren. They generally shared the same understanding that

Table 3. Grandchild–grandparent interaction when child is aged 6, where there is some contact with the grandparent, growing up in Scotland.

Relationship of the child's main carer to the child's grandparent	Sees child at least once a week	Sees child at least once a month	Looks after child at least once a week	Looks after child at least once a month	Baby-sits at least once a month	Stays overnight at least once a month	Took child out in the last year	Bases	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	Weighted	Unweighted
<i>'Maternal grandparents'</i>									
Carer's mother and father (living together)	74	86	48	68	40	31	72	1720	1776
Carer's mother (who lives alone)	72	85	40	57	40	26	54	1145	1110
Carer's mother and her partner	73	82	38	58	41	33	63	237	217
Carer's father (who lives alone)	47	67	14	27	14	14	31	569	538
Carer's father and his partner	30	59	9	25	17	11	48	117	117
<i>'Paternal grandparents'</i>									
Carer's partner's mother and father (who live together)	59	80	31	49	26	19	58	1275	1384
Carer's partner's mother (who lives alone)	55	75	22	38	22	16	41	711	736
Carer's partner's mother and her partner	42	75	20	32	20	20	54	120	124
Carer's partner's father (who lives alone)	38	61	11	18	8	4	20	311	314
Carer's partner's father and his partner	29	62	14	20	12	13	38	70	77
Non-resident parent's mother and father (who live together)	66	89	36	56	42	43	59	148	120
Non-resident parent's mother (who lives alone)	55	82	32	55	37	44	47	120	100
Non-resident parent's father (who lives alone)	32	71	9	16	12	19	33	57	47
Any one or more of the grandparent	78	89	50	68	43	34	71	3597	3600

closeness is constructed relationally through practices, including spending time together, doing things together, talking, giving and sharing, expressing affection physically and verbally (Jamieson, 2011; Morgan, 2011; Roseneil & Ketokivi, 2016). Both grandmother and grandfathers spoke gratefully of the opportunity to become closer to their grandchildren, sometimes afforded by their child's divorce and need of assistance. For example George emphasised that he and his wife both made sure they were physically affectionate with their grandchildren as a way of showing their love. George saw the grandparenting role as making up for his grandchildren's losses as a consequence of divorce (Timonen & Doyle, 2012). In speaking of the perceived inadequacies of his ex-son-in-law, he was also emphasising his opportunity to model intimate fathering for his grandson (Mann et al., 2016; Mann & Leeson, 2010; Tarrant, 2012).

I don't think we'd [grandparents] have been as close to the boys [grandchildren] if she hadn't left Tony [ex-husband]'...

... They won't leave without a kiss and a cuddle to both of us, you know. Arms go round you, and a cuddle and a kiss, that's, you know, that's the way we've shown them and it seems to have rubbed off. I thought by now, at 13, he (grandchild) would, you know, be all shy, but even if it's in the street, he'll still show some affection. So it's obviously worked, you know. ... It's, you can never be stand-offish, you've got to show them love, because he didn't get it from his father. And they would come, and I've had both of them sitting on my knee, on the chair, and I've said to Luke, bet you wouldn't do this with your dad – no. Do you get a cuddle from dad – you're joking, you know. His dad is cold that way. (George, maternal grandparent couple, 1 set of 2 grandchildren, daughter divorced)

Grandparents often developed strategies to try to enhance the quality of time with their grandchildren and ways of building intimacy. For example, arranging one-on-one time with grandchildren while not being distracted by other entertainments was something that Rose sought to achieve when taking a grandchild out for lunch.

What I have done maybe recently this year is on an odd occasion take them in a singly, em, individually because I prefer to do it that way, em, maybe for a snack lunch somewhere and it's good because you've got them for you, they're sitting opposite you, they can't go anywhere, upstairs to play with their stuff. And it's surprising what you learn. (Rose, divorced maternal and paternal grandmother, 2 sets and a total of 7 grandchildren)

Table 3 shows that even if there are strong shared understandings of grandparenting by grandmothers and grandfathers, this clearly translates very differently into action by maternal grandmothers and paternal grandfathers living alone and is much more disrupted for grandfathers by re-partnering.

GUS data allow comparison within the categories grandmothers and grandfathers by grandparenting sets and household circumstances. Maternal grandmothers living on their own and living in a new grandparent set formed by re-partnering are as likely to see a grandchild frequently as conventional maternal grandparents (72% & 73% vs 74% weekly, 85% & 82% vs 86% monthly). However, a smaller proportion provides weekly or monthly care than conventional maternal grandparent couples (40%/38% weekly & 57%/58% monthly vs 48% & 68%). Maternal grandmothers living alone are less likely to have taken the child out in the last year than re-partnered or conventional maternal grandparents (54% vs 63% vs 72%) and slightly less likely to have the child stay overnight at least once a month although the proportion who babysit is unaffected (40% vs 40% vs 41%). The effects of both living alone and re-partnering are much more dramatic for maternal grandfathers. There is a marked drop in the proportions of maternal grandfathers with new partners who regularly see their grandchildren or participate in any of the forms of interaction (30% sees weekly, 59% monthly). This is lower than the equivalent proportions for maternal grandfathers living on their own (47% weekly, 67% monthly) and dramatically lower than the 74% and 86% of the conventional maternal grandparents couples. The only interaction in which re-partnered maternal grandfathers have higher rates of participation than grandfathers living alone is taking the child out over the period of the previous 12 months (48% with new partner, 31% living alone). Taking a 6-year-old child on an outing, whether with or without siblings, may be experienced by many grandparents as more manageable with two adults. This activity is also higher among re-partnered paternal grandparents than the equivalent grandmother or grandfather living alone. The effects of being alone or re-partnering described for maternal grandfathers are similar among paternal grandfathers. The pattern for paternal grandmothers is also broadly similar to

maternal grandmothers, albeit re-partnering has slightly more impact. The proportions of paternal grandmothers who frequently see their grandchild are not dramatically affected by living alone (55% & 75% vs 59% & 80% sees weekly and monthly) and 75% of re-partnered paternal grandmothers also see the child at least monthly, but the proportion seeing the child weekly is much lower at 42%.

Lessons from new types of grandparents

Earlier discussion has already suggested how gender differences might explain a contrast in levels of interaction with grandchildren between two new grandparent sets – grandmothers and their new partners versus grandfathers and their new partners. More grandmothers than grandfathers will be experienced kin keepers, practised at orchestrating and sustaining relationships. Grandfathers may not be as adept at creating segues that would incorporate a new partner into relationships with prior grandchildren. Also grandfathers have no reason to anticipate that their ex-partner will fade from the grandparent scene and may themselves be more easily discouraged. For example, among the grandmother interviewees, a divorced maternal grandmother admitted that she would resist any contact between her grandchildren and their grandfather, her estranged ex-husband.

I think he would, he would quite like to be involved but really it's too awkward, I feel awkward about it ... It's not, it wouldn't be natural. (Patricia, divorced maternal grandmother, one set of two grandchildren)

Knudsen's (2016) analysis of survey data of adults over the age of 50 in 11 European countries shows that grandfathers are more likely to be involved in caring for a grandchild when they have a partner by their side. From grandparents' perspectives, the grandchild participating in GUS may be only one of a number of sets of grandchildren. This might contribute to the contradiction between Knudsen's analysis and the picture generated by GUS which indicates that re-partnering depresses grandfathers' involvement with a grandchild. It is possible that grandfathers' new female partners may indeed help to support their grandparenting, but that the opposite is shown in the GUS data if a new partner's support refocuses grandfatherly energies towards new sets of grandchildren.

Sam is a re-partnered grandparent who illustrates these possibilities. He was a paternal grandfather with grandchildren by two sons from his first marriage. His new wife was still parenting when he re-partnered. At the time of interview she had three sets of grandchildren; she was both a maternal and paternal grandmother, and considered Sam to be their grandfather. Sam admitted that the daughter of his new partner's youngest daughter was his favourite grandchild. He spoke of the coolness he felt from his 'own family' and suggested that his ex-wife had contributed to his exclusion by 'taking over'.

A very dysfunctional family. They just, they live their own life. If I don't phone them they don't phone me. ... Right, so that's the way it is. It's just when I got separated from my wife she sort of like took over. (Sam, remarried maternal and paternal grandfather with 5 sets and a total of 8 grandchildren)

Another 'new type' of grandparent set are parents of non-resident fathers, including fathers who have never lived with their child. Their grandchild typically has a young

mother and they themselves have an age profile that is younger than the conventional set of paternal grandparents. We did not succeed in interviewing any of these grandparents, most of whom have no contact with their grandchild. Table 3 shows that those who were in contact include very clear examples of involved grandparenting beyond the maternal grandmother and conventional lineage. Some of their levels of engagement exceed other paternal grandparents, sometimes matching the involvement of maternal grandparents. The percentage who babysit at least once a month, 42%, and have the child overnight, 43%, is even slightly more than the equivalent figures among the 'maternal grandparent' couple. Some such grandparents speak out from the qualitative research literature (Doyle et al., 2010; Emmel & Hughes, 2014). For example, the research by Martha Doyle et al. (2010) with parental grandparents in Ireland found cases of paternal grandparents stepping in when sons were neglectful and absent as fathers, supporting their grandchild's mother and working at sustaining a good relationship with her, modelling fathering for their son, and attempting to keep the possibility of him taking up the father-child relationship open.

Conclusion

The data presented confirm the continued combined significance of 'lineage' and gender but counter examples signal the dangers of assuming that a maternal grandmother takes the key role in any particular instance and the problematic nature of assumptions about the future position of maternal grandmothers. This is despite the hierarchy of involvement between grandparents and grandchildren showing maternal grandmothers (whether supported by the maternal grandfather, a new partner or living alone) at the top and paternal grandfathers (particularly those living alone and with new partners), at the bottom. As the wider literature suggests, grandparents who are neither matrilineal nor grandmothers can also have very intense involvement with grandchildren albeit that very involved grandfathers are usually found in combination with a grandmother. GUS data show the proliferation of those named as grandparents beyond the conventional mother and father of the child's social and biological mother and father. These new grandparenting sets are formed by dissolution, re-partnering and the separation of biological and social parenting. Across all the new categories, there are some grandparents who are very engaged, although the overall proportion of those who are involved never matches conventional maternal grandparents. A portion of the small group of parents of non-resident fathers that are named as grandparents stand out; for some forms of interaction, they exhibit levels of involvement than match maternal grandparent couples.

The term 'matrilineal advantage' is in itself problematic. Its reference to a biological line through women is consistent with children's probability of being closer to a maternal grandmother than any other living grandparent, but the emphasis on blood de-emphasises the relationality and effort in producing emotionally close ties between grandparents and grandchildren. The necessary efforts in sustaining close relationships with grandchildren are likely to be greater for grandparents who start from a position emotionally removed from the key gatekeeper, the grandchild's mother or primary carer. However, a mother's parents' 'advantage', nevertheless, remains contingent on effort. Hence, the possibilities of other types of grandparents are matching or overtaking the efforts of maternal grandparents.

Matrilineal advantage glosses the complexity of gendered couple and intergenerational dynamics that produce the hierarchy of involvement. Grandparent–grandchild relationships unfold in more or less gender differentiated ways in the interplay of the specific members of the three generations: the grandchildren, the middle parenting generation and grandparents, who are working with their own stock of experiences as mothers or fathers. Gender differences in how grandmothers and grandfathers relate to their grandchildren are also modified by the gender dynamics of being partnered, unpartnered and re-partnered in both the grandparenting and the middle, parenting, generation. Matrilineal advantage underplays the structural and cultural framing that underpins maternal grandmothers' greater proximity to and capacity to care for their grandchildren. Women's advantage of greater longevity over men and persistence in traditional age differences on marriage play their part, but the persistence of gendered divisions of labour and conventions around gender and care also remains key.

If the overall balance of grandmothers' closer relationships to children than grandfathers' is still underpinned by systematic gender differences, the nature of these differences will set the pace of change. If the key difference is in experience of caring for children's interests and in prioritising children over paid work, the balance is likely to shift slowly. On the other hand, if prior experience of enjoying relationships with children is key, it may shift more rapidly. 'Parenting', in practice, more mothering than fathering, became more intensive and child-centred decades before 'the intimate father' became the norm. The normative ideal of 'intimate father' did not then rapidly translated into men-who-mother but gradually more men have and do take on mothering roles. Research on fathers also documents one-to-one, emotionally close relationships with children, despite much less than an equal share in the work of their care. The 'intimate grandfather', who maintains emotionally close relationships with his grandchildren, without dependence on the skills of his grandmothering partner, looms larger in prospect than in living practice. Very gradually, more men effectively share or take on the key parenting role of 'mother in the middle', equipping them with relational and kin-keeping skills characteristics of the stereotypical maternal grandmothers. A larger set of men have experience of a close one-to-one relationship with their child as fathers but it is not yet clear whether they typically become intimate grandfathers, regardless of the support of a grandmother. If the balance does indeed shift, the effect of widowhood and re-partnering on active grandfathering will become much less dramatic.

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